

Old brands in new bottles

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After a dismal start to the season, the owners of Britain's historic houses and gardens are pinning their hopes on the weather improving soon. Alongside them will be should also give a entrepreneur Eldon Robson: the public's thirst for heritage is re-energising Fentimans, his family's soft-drinks business, after a winter sleep that lasted a quarter of a century.

The business went into cold storage in 1970 after its fermented ginger beers and shandies lost out to mass-produced colas and fizzy drinks. But by the mid-1990s people were searching for more distinctive alternatives. Mr Robson saw his opportunity and resurrected his family's 90-year-old company in 1994.

Mr Robson, owner and managing director, sold his laundry business and borrowed money from the bank and family, so firm was his faith in the public's taste for "old British classics" such as ginger beer, and dandelion and burdock.

His decision highlights a market trend that entrepreneurs are turning to their advantage. "On the one hand, people are looking for uniqueness," says Peter Matthews, managing director of the brand and intellectual property consultancy Nuc-leus. "On the other, entrepreneurs are asking themselves why they should go through the hassle and expense of creating a trade-marked name when they can buy one that already exists."

Uniting modern commercial discipline with a brand steeped in tradition is a fine balancing act. Mr Robson treads the tightrope with some skill. His drinks, INCLUDE SOME OF THE FENTIMANS NAMES IN HERE which also include Victorian Lemonade, Seville Orange Jigger and Curiosity Cola, contain natural ingredients, herbs, crushed roots and fruit juices. But the picturesque stone jars in which the beverages were once fermented and sold door-to-door have given way to pasteurisation and brewing off-site. "We realised we needed proper controls, so now we use a regional brewer who makes Fentimans to our formula."

Fentimans' positioning marks another break with the past. "Our drinks used to be thirst-quenchers for the working man. Today they are a lot more expensive. When we started again, we really had to work hard to explain that our drinks take seven days to produce, and have a much fuller and more rounded flavour than ordinary carbonates."

With a turnover just above GBP2m (\$3.8m) a year, Mr Robson today has the budget to advertise nationally. Until now, with few marketing re-sources to call upon, he has often struggled to explain to the public why they should buy his "botanically brewed" drinks instead of mass-market brands costing less than half the price.

A feature in the inhouse magazine of an upmarket supermarket caught the eye of the foodie consumers to whom Fentimans needs to appeal to be profitable. As well as pushing hard for supermarket shelf space, Mr Robson has used the brand's period character to open doors at venues with a heritage connection, such as galleries and National Trust properties.

A problem faced by brands that lean on heritage is how to invoke the past without appearing outdated. By lacing tradition with modern humour, Mr Robson hopes to escape from this bind and overcome what he describes as "a tendency for younger people to see us as a little bit straight and serious".

Using period typefaces, the advertisements contrive to look like the real thing, while making jokes about "repressed" Victorians and British eccentrics.

With just six drinks to its name Fentimans is a focused business with a planned growth trajectory that is solid, not meteoric. Should he be tempted to range more widely in the future, Mr Robson could look for inspiration to John Sleeman, the Canadian brewer who has also overseen a comeback success. The Sleeman Brewing and Malting Company had to sell out after smuggling contraband liquor to the US during Prohibition. embroiled in Fifty years later,

Mr Sleeman, grandson of the last owner, traced the dormant business to Nabisco, and bought the rights for \$1.

Mr Sleeman, chairman and chief executive, was determined to build a high-growth company and developed the business DOES HE OWN IT AND WHAT IS HIS JOB TITLE? FINANCIAL BACKING????through acquisitions and partnerships, to the point where it has net revenues of C\$207m (US\$189m). CAN WE VERIFY THAT AND GIVE THE SOURCE??? (NOT JUST TAKE THEIR WO

Mr Sleeman contributed 66 per cent of the start-up finance for the business, from bank loans and personal savings. Other finance came from the Stroh Brewery Company, which took a 19 per cent equity stake, and private investors. In 1996, The Sleeman Brewing and Malting Company acquired Okanagan Spring, a public company, decided to go public itself and became Sleeman Breweries. Mr Sleeman owns 5 per cent of the stock.

Comparing how the two entrepreneurs manage their brands reveals as many differences as similarities.

When Mr Sleeman relaunched the business in 1985, he started with a cream ale painstakingly recreated from a family recipe. To reproduce the appearance of the original bottles he used clear glass, a move unique among beer brands in Canada in the 1980s. This doubled his packaging costs and made the ale vulnerable to oxidation, so he introduced stricter quality controls to protect against exposure to sunlight during distribution.

painstakingly WAS IT TRICKY?? "We felt we needed to stay as close to the original as possible and went over budget to get everything right," he says. "In the days before we could afford to advertise, our bottles were the thing that got us noticed."

With the provenance of his brand established, Mr Sleeman did not allow the demands of authenticity to dictate the strategy. Unlike Mr Robson, whose products are all inspired by classic recipes, Mr Sleeman presides over a portfolio in which drinks lifted from the pages of his grandfather's leather-bound notebook sit alongside modern inventions, such as a low-calorie beer.

In straying from his roots Mr Sleeman has upset the purists. He counters that while "you can hang your hat on heritage to get people interested", an entrepreneur must operate in several niches to build a growth business. "People are becoming more interested in heritage. But if you limit their choice, they'll turn round and say that they want a light beer because they don't want to be fat."

Mr Sleeman's use of heritage as the starting point for diversification would resonate with Robert Dreyfuss, the entrepreneurial fourth-generation chairman of the Swiss-owned Rotary Watches company.

On September 1, Mr Dreyfuss plans to unveil a range of affordable classic watches in precious metals, which he hopes will colonise a vacant niche separating Rotary's existing brands from higher-ticket, fashion-oriented timepieces such as Omega, Breitling and Tag Heuer. To give the collection a pedigree, Mr Dreyfuss has acquired the rights and hallmark stamp of J&T Windmills, a celebrated English watch-maker that folded in 1737 when the founder died without heirs. WHEN DID IT "FOLD"??

For the head of a veteran Swiss company to launch a brand with an English lineage is surprising. More surprising still is his decision to make the watches in England, a choice that breaks with Rotary's 100-year tradition of Swiss manufacturing.

But Mr Dreyfuss has ambitious plans: to reclaim the legacy, not just of J&T Windmills but of an era when English, rather than Swiss, timepieces were internationally sought after. "We took the view that the last thing the global market needs is another Swiss watch brand. The

collection is unashamedly made in England, and in a style redolent of the golden age of English clock-making." The watches have precious metals and floral engravings.

By reviving a name that died out three centuries ago, Mr Dreyfuss is stretching brand rebirth to new extremes. Whether the born-again marque lives up to its adopted pedigree only the public can decide.

METAMORPHOSIS FROM OUTDATED CURIOSITY TO MODERN CLASSIC

Recent years have seen a spate of brand rebirths, ranging from classic marques such as Triumph Motorcycles and Plymouth Gin, to the reopening of family businesses, such as Fentimans and Sleeman Breweries. Generally, they:

Use heritage cues, such as trademarks, original recipes and period packaging.

Establish the credibility of their brand by building out from a core of products that stick closely to the original template.

Sacrifice picturesque but uneconomic production methods to create a sustainable business. Eldon Robson abandoned the tradition of fermenting the drinks in stone jars and hired a regional brewer to brew to Fentimans' specifications.

Innovate John Sleeman used partnership agreements and acquisitions to expand the business and developed contemporary-style beers, to complement the inherited traditional recipes.

Monitor public opinion and fine-tune products to stay in step with consumer tastes. Mr Sleeman gave the brand a low-calorie beer.

Communicate their heritage in a modern style. Mr Robson uses tongue-in-cheek humour to give his brand a more youthful appeal.

Position the brands as modern classics, not historical curiosities.

Are open about what they have borrowed from the past and what they have ditched.

Fonte: Financial Times, USA, June 1 2006. Business Life, p. 7.